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C O N F I D E N T I A L SOFIA 000616

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [IZ](#) [BU](#)

SUBJECT: BULGARIA: GOVERNMENT SENDS IRAQ EXIT STRATEGY TO PARLIAMENT

REF: A) SOFIA 604 B) SOFIA 524 C) SOFIA 436 D) SOFIA 486 E) SOFIA 67 F) 04 SOFIA 2261 G) 04 SOFIA 2054 (NOTAL) H) IIR 6 811 0105 05 I) IIR 6 811 0090 05

Classified By: Ambassador James Pardew, reasons, 1.4(B) and (D).

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Bulgarian Council of Ministers (CM) approved and sent to Parliament on March 31 a proposal to set 31 December 2005 as the deadline for the end of Bulgaria's military participation in the Multi-National Force in Iraq (MNF-I). The CM also asked Parliament to reduce the country's current 500 troop mandate to 400 troops. The GOB tried to balance this decision by requesting a mandate to consult with Coalition Partners on "more suitable forms" for Bulgaria to continue its participation in international initiatives supporting security and stability in Iraq. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Trying to put the best face on the government's action, spokesman Dimitar Tsonev said the draft decision should not be interpreted as a move by Bulgaria to leave the Coalition in Iraq. He added that Bulgaria would "continue to help in Iraq through other means as it searches for other suitable forms of participation." Tsonev did not rule out the possibility for Bulgaria to send a different military unit to Iraq after 2005, perhaps under the auspices of the NATO training mission. The GOB's proposal on Iraq will most likely be discussed in the Foreign Policy, Defense and Security Committee on April 7 in a closed meeting and then is expected to be voted on by the full Parliament in mid-April.

[1](#)3. (C) COMMENT: The announced troop reduction is primarily a political gesture to the Bulgarian electorate. In fact, the reduction has been planned for several months, since some Bulgarian logistics troops are no longer needed at Camp Al-Diwaniyah. The GOB's position on withdrawing from Iraq will likely trigger an intense partisan debate before it is approved by the Parliament in coming weeks, not because the proposal is particularly controversial in Bulgaria, but because opposition parties will use it as an opportunity to grandstand. With polls showing over sixty percent of Bulgarians against the country's involvement in Iraq and the opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party campaigning for an immediate pullout, the government is seeking with this decision to neutralize Iraq as a campaign issue before the coming June elections.